

Lassen National Forest Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation

USDA Forest Service

Lassen National Forest

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Introduction

The Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture will prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on a proposal to designate over-snow vehicle (OSV) use as allowed, restricted, or prohibited on National Forest System roads, National Forest System trails, and Areas on National Forest System lands within the Lassen National Forest; and to identify snow trails for grooming within the Lassen National Forest. This proposal would be implemented on all of the Lassen National Forest. Maps of this proposal are on pages 10 and 11 of this document.

Background

Snow Trail Grooming Program

For over 30 years, the Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region, in cooperation with the California Department of Parks and Recreation (California State Parks) Off-highway Motor Vehicle Division has enhanced winter recreation, and more specifically, snowmobiling recreation by maintaining National Forest System trails (snow trails) by grooming snow for snowmobile use. Most groomed snow trails are co-located on underlying National Forest System roads. Some grooming occurs on County roads and closed snow-covered highways. Grooming activities are funded by the state off-highway vehicle trust fund.

The following summarizes how the Forest Service currently manages OSV use on the approximately 1,150,020-acre Lassen National Forest:

- Approximately 406 miles of National Forest System OSV trails;
- Of the approximately 406 miles of National Forest System OSV trails, approximately 324 miles are groomed OSV trails;
- Approximately 148 miles of National Forest System trail closed to OSV use;
- Approximately 976,760 acres of National Forest System land open to off-trail cross-country OSV use; and
- Approximately 173,260 acres of National Forest System land closed to OSV use.

In 2013, the Forest Service entered into a Settlement Agreement with Snowlands Network et al., to “complete appropriate NEPA [National Environmental Policy Act] analysis(es) to identify snow trails for grooming” on the Lassen National Forest and four other national forests in California. The Forest Service will comply with the terms of the Settlement Agreement for the Lassen National Forest by completing this analysis.

Travel Management Rule Subpart C

The Forest Service's 2005 Travel Management Rule established new procedures (see 36 CFR part 212 Subpart C), for implementing the requirements of Executive Order (E.O.) 11644, as amended by E.O. 11989 on the National Forest System. On March 29, 2013, the U.S. District Court of Idaho, in the case of *Winter Wildlands Alliance v. U.S. Forest Service* (2013 WL 1319598, No. 1:11-CV-586-REB (D. Idaho Mar. 29, 2013)), ruled that subpart C of the 2005 Travel Management Rule was invalid because the rule made designation of OSV use of roads, trails and Areas optional. The court ordered the Forest Service to produce a new rule that treats OSVs similar to other motor vehicles by requiring the designation of OSV use on roads, trails, and Areas, consistent with E.O. 11644, as amended by E.O. 11989.

The revised rule was issued for a 45-day public comment period in the Federal Register on June 18, 2014 (79 FR 34678, Jun. 18, 2014). As proposed, subpart C of the Travel Management Rule states, "Over-snow vehicle use on National Forest System roads, on National Forest System trails, and in Areas on National Forest System lands shall be designated as allowed, restricted, or prohibited by the responsible official on administrative units or Ranger Districts, or parts of administrative units or Ranger Districts, of the National Forest System where snowfall is adequate for that use to occur . . ." (36 CFR 212.81(a)). OSV designations made as a result of the analysis in this Environmental Impact Statement would conform to the final subpart C rule.

Purpose and Need

One purpose of this project is to effectively manage OSV use on the Lassen National Forest to provide access, ensure that OSV use occurs when there is adequate snow, promote the safety of all users, enhance public enjoyment, minimize impacts to natural and cultural resources, and minimize conflicts among the various uses.

There is a need to provide a manageable, designated OSV system of trails and Areas within the Lassen National Forest, that is consistent with and achieves the purposes of the Forest Service Travel Management Rule at 36 CFR part 212. This action responds to direction provided by the Forest Service's Travel Management Rule at 36 CFR part 212 and subpart C of the Travel Management Rule, as proposed.

The existing system of available OSV trails and Areas on the Lassen National Forest is the culmination of multiple agency decisions over recent decades. Public OSV use of the majority of this available system continues to be manageable and consistent with current travel management regulations. Exceptions have been identified, based on internal and public input and the criteria listed at 36 CFR 212.55. These include needs to provide improved access for OSV users and formalize prohibitions required by Forest Plan and other management direction. These exceptions represent additional needs for change, and in these cases, changes are proposed to meet the overall objectives.

Currently, the Forest Service requires 12 or more inches of snow on the ground to operate an OSV on the Lassen National Forest. Although 12 inches of snow may exist at a given time in many higher elevation Areas, there may be less than 12 inches of snow at trailheads, which under current rules, would leave Areas with 12 or more inches of snow inaccessible to OSV use. To improve OSV access to Areas open to OSV use, the proposed action would allow OSV use on designated trails, as long as there are at least 6 inches of snow on the ground.

The Forest Service has also identified two Areas in which OSV use should be prohibited, but there are no existing orders or directives that have formally prohibited OSV use within them. One

Area is located in the southwest corner of the Lassen National Forest, below 3,500 feet in elevation. Snowfall is typically not adequate in this Area for OSV use to occur. This Area is approximately 29,130 acres in size. The proposed action would prohibit OSV use in this Area.

The second Area in which OSV use should be prohibited is the Black Mountain Research Natural Area (RNA). The Lassen National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) prohibits motorized vehicles within Research Natural Areas, but no formal directive prohibiting such use has been issued. This Area is approximately 520 acres in size. The proposed action would prohibit OSV use in the Black Mountain RNA.

A second purpose of this project is to identify those designated National Forest System OSV trails where grooming for OSV use would occur as required by the Settlement Agreement between the Forest Service and Snowlands Network, et al. Under the terms of the Settlement Agreement, the Forest Service is required to complete the appropriate NEPA analysis to identify snow trails for grooming on the Lassen National Forest. This action would identify snow trails for grooming.

The snow trail grooming analysis would also address the need to provide a high quality snowmobile trail system on the Lassen National Forest that is smooth and stable for the rider. Groomed trails are designed so that the novice rider can use them without difficulty.

In addition to identifying snow trails for grooming, the Settlement Agreement requires the Forest Service to:

1. Analyze ancillary activities such as the plowing of related parking lots and trailheads as part of the effects analysis;
2. Consider a range of alternative actions that would result in varying levels of snowmobile use; and
3. Consider an alternative submitted by Plaintiffs and/or Interveners in the NEPA analysis so long as the alternative meets the purpose and need, and is feasible and within the scope of the NEPA analysis, and Plaintiffs and/or Interveners provide the Forest Service with a detailed description of that alternative during the scoping period for the NEPA analysis.

Proposed Action

The Forest Service proposes several actions on the Lassen National Forest to be analyzed as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The actions proposed are as follows:

1. To designate OSV use on National Forest System roads, National Forest System trails, and Areas on National Forest System lands within the Lassen National Forest where snowfall depth is adequate for that use to occur. The responsible official would designate OSV use as allowed, restricted, or prohibited on administrative units or Ranger Districts, or parts of administrative units or Ranger Districts of the Lassen National Forest. All existing OSV prohibitions applying to Areas or trails would continue. OSV use that is inconsistent with the designations made under this project would be prohibited under 36 CFR part 261.
2. To prohibit OSV use in any area below 3,500 feet in elevation on the Lassen National Forest. On the Lassen National Forest, an adequate amount of snowfall for OSV use typically occurs in most areas of the forest, except for areas below 3,500 feet in the southwest corner of the forest.
3. To prohibit OSV use in the Black Mountain Research Natural Area.

4. To identify approximately 324 miles of designated OSV trails that would be groomed by the Forest Service on the Lassen National Forest. Our trail mileages are estimates only and we are currently reviewing groomed trails where there is uncertainty regarding Forest Service jurisdiction.
5. To groom trails consistent with historical grooming practices, when there are 18 inches of snow or more, and formally adopt California State Parks' snow grooming standards requiring a minimum of 18 inches of snow depth before grooming can occur.
6. To implement a Forest-wide snow depth requirement for OSV use that would provide for public safety and natural and cultural resource protection by allowing OSV use in designated Areas when there is a minimum of 12 inches of snow covering the landscape; and allow OSV use on designated National Forest System roads and designated National Forest System Trails when there is a minimum of 6 inches of snow covering the road or trail. When the snow-depth requirement is not met, OSV use would be prohibited. All snow trails would be located on existing dirt, gravel, or paved trails or roads. These trails and roads are used in the summer for highway, OHV, and non-motorized recreation.

The proposed actions are summarized in table 1 and table 2, and on maps displayed on pages 10 and 11 of this document.

Table 1. Summary comparing current OSV management with the proposed action for the management of OSV use on the Lassen National Forest

OSV Management	Current OSV Management	Proposed Action
National Forest System (NFS) Lands within the Lassen National Forest	1,150,020 Acres	
NFS Lands within the Lassen National Forest where OSV Use Designations would Apply	1,150,020 Acres	1,150,020 Acres
OSV Use Allowed:		
• Designated Areas	976,760 Acres	947,120 Acres
• Designated Trails	406 Miles	406 Miles
OSV Use Prohibited:		
• Designated Areas	173,260 Acres	202,900 Acres
○ Below 3,500 Feet in Elevation Included in Above Total	0 Acres	29,130 Acres
○ Black Mountain RNA Included in Above Total	0 Acres	520 Acres
• Designated Trails	148 Miles	148 Miles
Minimum Snow Depth for OSV Use on Designated Trails	12 inches	6 inches
Minimum Snow Depth for Off-trail, Cross-country OSV Use	12 inches	12 inches
All area size and trail distance estimates are approximate and are rounded to the nearest 10 acres or nearest mile.		

Table 2. Summary comparing current groomed OSV trails with proposed action for the grooming of OSV trails on the Lassen National Forest

OSV Management	Current OSV Management	Proposed Action
Total Groomed Trail System*	324 Miles	324 Miles

OSV Management	Current OSV Management	Proposed Action
Minimum Snow Depth for Snow Trail Grooming to Occur	18 inches	18 inches

*Included in the miles of trail over which OSV use is allowed in table 1.

Distance estimates are approximate and are rounded to the nearest mile.

The designations resulting from this analysis would only apply to the use of OSVs. An OSV is defined in the Forest Service's Travel Management Rule as "a motor vehicle that is designed for use over snow and that runs on a track or tracks and/or a ski or skis, while in use over snow" (36 CFR 212.1).

Other types of motor vehicles that may operate over snow, but do not meet the definition of an OSV, are regulated under Subpart B of the Travel Management Rule. Routes and Areas for these types of vehicles were previously designated and published on a motor vehicle use map as the result of a separate environmental analysis and decision.

Limited administrative use by the Forest Service; use of any fire, military, emergency, or law enforcement vehicle for emergency purposes; authorized use of any combat or combat support vehicle for national defense purposes; law enforcement response to violations of law, including pursuit; and OSV use that is specifically authorized under a written authorization issued under Federal law or regulations would be exempt from these designations (36 CFR 212.81(a)).

National Forest System roads, National Forest System trails, and Areas on National Forest System lands where OSV use is designated as allowed, restricted, or prohibited would be shown on an OSV use map (OSVUM). This map would show the roads, trails and Areas where OSV use is allowed. It also would show trailheads and other ancillary recreational facilities.

Allowed OSV Use

OSV use would be designated as currently allowed on 406 miles of trails on the Lassen National Forest. Off-trail cross-country OSV use would also be designated as allowed on 947,120 acres. All designated OSV use would be subject to snow-depth restrictions. All OSV use would be prohibited on the Lassen National Forest unless there is adequate snow depth that meets the following conditions:

Allowed OSV Use	Minimum Snow Depth
OSV use on designated snow trails with underlying roads and trails:	6 inches
Cross-country off-trail OSV use:	12 inches

Current management requires a minimum snow depth of 12 inches for OSV use. The minimum snow depth of 6 inches for OSV use on trails with underlying roads and trails represents a change from existing management. This change is to provide improved trail access for OSV users from trailheads to deeper snow areas.

OSV Use on Groomed Trails

The proposed action would identify 324 miles of National Forest System trails that would be groomed for OSV use on the Lassen National Forest (map, page 11). This would represent no change from current management.

Table 3 compares the number of miles of groomed snow trails that have historically been groomed and are currently managed with the miles of snow trails under the proposed action that are identified to be groomed. When there are 6 inches or more of snow covering these trails they would be open to OSV use. Snow trail grooming for OSV use would occur on all of these trails only when there are 18 or more inches of snow on the ground. Groomed trail systems would be located in the following areas:

Table 3. Comparison of miles of groomed trail under current management and proposed action (miles)

OSV Area	Current OSV Management	Proposed Action
Ashpan*	41	41
Bogard	26	26
Fredonyer	44	44
Jonesville	62	62
Morgan Summit	60	60
Swain Mountain	91	91
Total	324	324

*Includes 3 miles of groomed snow trail within the Latour State Forest trail system that are located on National Forest System land and accessible from the Ashpan area.

The grooming season generally begins in mid-December and continues through March. Start and stop times vary per trail location and are dependent upon the presence and depth of snow. Snow Trails are prioritized for grooming based on visitor use. Grooming historically occurred several times per week. As part of this proposal the grooming frequency on priority trails would occur several times per week and after major storms, typically between 4:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. The total hours of trail grooming that would occur at each site for an average season are shown in table 4.

Table 4. Summary of grooming operations on the Lassen National Forest

Grooming Location	Annual Groomed Miles	Annual Snowcat Hours	Max Day Hours
Ashpan	1,743	249	12
Bogard and Fredonyer	5,076	680	12
Jonesville	2,222	420	25
Morgan Summit	900	300	12
Swain Mountain	660	94	12

Trails would be groomed to a minimum width of 10 feet and typically up to 14 feet wide. Trails would be groomed up to 30 feet wide in the more heavily used areas such as near trailheads. Groomed trail width is determined by variety of factors such as width of the underlying road bed, width of grooming tractor, heavy two-way traffic on the trail, and trail corners. Trail width would not be groomed beyond width of underlying roadbed. Where the terrain allows, main ingress and egress trails that connect to the trailhead would be groomed to 18 feet wide or greater to facilitate the added traffic.

Snowcats are operated at speeds in the range of three to seven miles per hour. The vehicle is operated with warning lights on at all times. The maximum hours of equipment operation is generally a 12-hour day during peak season (table 4).

Trail grooming would be conducted in accordance with the 1997 Snowmobile Trail Grooming Standards set by the California Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation (OHMVR) Division, as follows:

- Operators shall be trained and directed by a grooming coordinator.
- Identify hazards in advance of grooming, preferably in autumn before snow falls.
- Typical grooming season is from December to March. Operate the snow tractor on approved designated trails only. Maintain a 10-foot vertical clearance from potential obstructions.
- Limit grooming speeds to between three to seven miles per hour.
- Groom trails to a minimum of 10 feet wide with a typical width of 10 to 14 feet.

The California OHMVR Division's snowcat fleet is subject to emission regulation by the California Air Resources Board (CARB) as off road equipment. The CARB sets an emission limit for the vehicle fleet as a whole rather than for individual pieces of equipment. Based on the total horsepower of the vehicle fleet, and the model and year of the individual equipment within the fleet, CARB determines how much horsepower per year must be repowered, retrofitted, or retired. The California OHMVR Division then determines what modifications to make to its fleet in order to satisfy CARB requirements.

Designation of Areas

The proposed subpart C regulations define an Area as, "a discrete, specifically delineated space that is smaller, and, except for OSV use, in most cases much smaller, than a Ranger District." The proposed action would designate Areas on the Lassen National Forest where off-trail cross-country OSV uses would be allowed when there are 12 or more inches of snow on the ground. These Areas total approximately 947,120 acres. These Areas are located in any part of the Lassen National Forest where OSVs are not otherwise prohibited.

Prohibited OSV Use

The proposed action would continue existing prohibitions on OSV use on approximately 173,260 acres of NFS land and add new OSV use prohibitions on approximately 29,650 acres. These new prohibitions would apply to areas below 3,500 feet and in the Black Mountain RNA (table 5). Existing OSV prohibitions in Wilderness areas and in areas designated in the Forest Plan as Recommended Wilderness, Semi-primitive Non-motorized, and Research Natural Areas that currently have the force of law, regulation or policy and would continue to exist. Combined with Areas where motorized vehicles are currently prohibited by law, regulation, or policy, OSV use would be prohibited on a total of approximately 202,900 acres.

Table 5. Areas where OSV use would be prohibited by the Proposed Action (Acres)

OSV-Prohibited Area	Current Management	Proposed Action
Below 3,500 feet Outside of Semi-primitive Non-motorized and Wilderness	0	29,130
Black Mountain Research Natural Area	0	520
Caribou Wilderness	20,830	20,830
Chips Creek Semi-primitive Non-motorized	18,320	18,320
Cinder Butte Semi-primitive Non-motorized	13,700	13,700

OSV-Prohibited Area	Current Management	Proposed Action
Cub Creek Research Natural Area	4,090	4,090
Eagle Lake Osprey Management Area	1,670	1,670
Heart Lake Recommended Wilderness	8,620	8,620
Ishi B Semi-primitive Non-motorized Outside of Ishi Wilderness	13,700	13,700
Ishi Wilderness	40,910	40,910
Keddie Ridge Semi-primitive Non-motorized	3,490	3,490
Mill Creek Recommended Wilderness	7,710	7,710
Onion Springs Semi-primitive Non-motorized	1,080	1,080
Prospect Semi-primitive Non-motorized	2,610	2,610
Snow Mountain Semi-primitive Non-motorized	700	700
Thousand Lakes Wilderness	16,570	16,570
Unnamed Minimal Management Area in the vicinity of Butt Mountain	1,660	1,660
Unnamed Minimal Management Area in the vicinity of Hat Creek Rim	12,740	12,740
Wild Cattle Mountain Recommended Wilderness	4,890	4,890
Total OSV-Prohibited Area	173,260	202,900
All estimates are approximate and are rounded to the nearest 10 acres.		

OSV use is currently prohibited on six trails and trail systems on the Lassen National Forest. The proposed action would continue these prohibitions (table 6).

Table 6. NFS trails where OSV use would be prohibited by the Proposed Action (miles on the Lassen National Forest)

Trail/Tail System	Current Management	Proposed Action
Pacific Crest Trail	106	106
Colby Mountain Cross-country Ski Trails	6	6
McGowan Lake Cross-country Ski Trails	5	5
Biz Johnson Trail from Susanville to Westwood Junction	17	17
Lake Almanor Recreation Trail	9	9
Eagle Lake Trail	5	5
Total	148	148
Distance estimates are approximate and are rounded to the nearest mile.		

Design Features

The proposed action includes the following design features:

- All fuel and other chemicals shall be stored at the groomer storage facilities or outside riparian areas.
- All equipment maintenance and refueling shall occur at the storage facilities or outside the Riparian Conservation Area.
- Spill containment equipment shall be kept at the storage facilities.

- Trails may be temporarily closed by the Forest for other types of management activities such as contracted timber or vegetation management or other resource concerns.
- Groomed trails are closed to wheeled vehicle use from December 26 through March 31.
- The Forest Service has an obligation to monitor the effects of OSV use as required by Subpart C of the Travel Management Rule. Furthermore, as an ongoing part of our State-funded OSV program, California State Parks provides funding to the Forest Service to monitor our trail systems for evidence of OSV trespass into closed areas, OSV use near or damage of sensitive plant and wildlife sites, and low snow areas subject to erosion concerns.

Other design features and monitoring measures would be added to this list throughout the scoping and analysis processes.

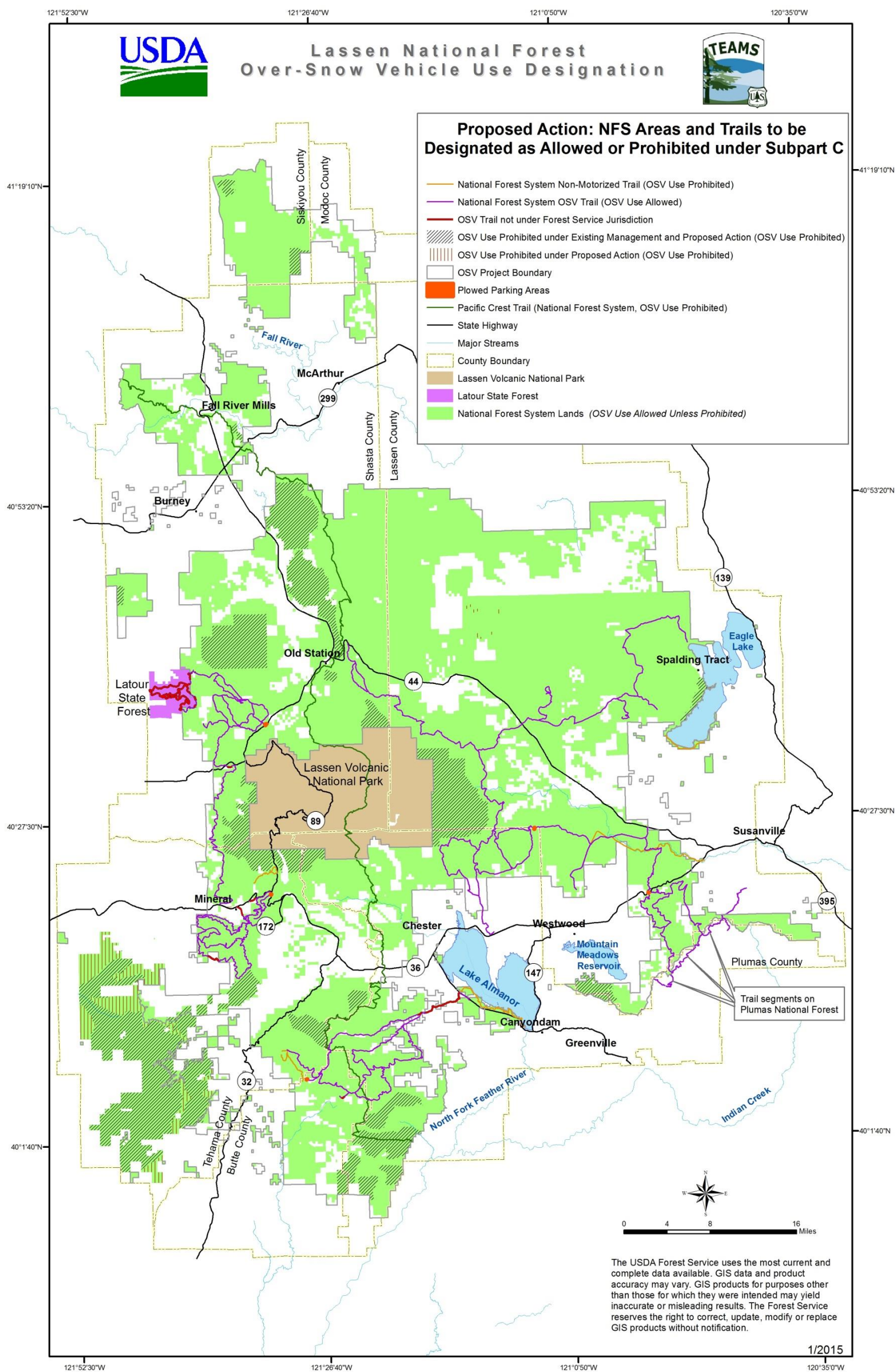
Management Sideboards

The Lassen National Forest Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation is not intended to be a comprehensive, holistic winter recreation planning effort. This decision would apply only to the use of OSVs on the Lassen National Forest. No designation of non-motorized trails or areas would result. Non-motorized winter recreational opportunities and uses will be considered in the analysis in terms of the effects designating OSV trails and areas may have on non-motorized recreational opportunities.

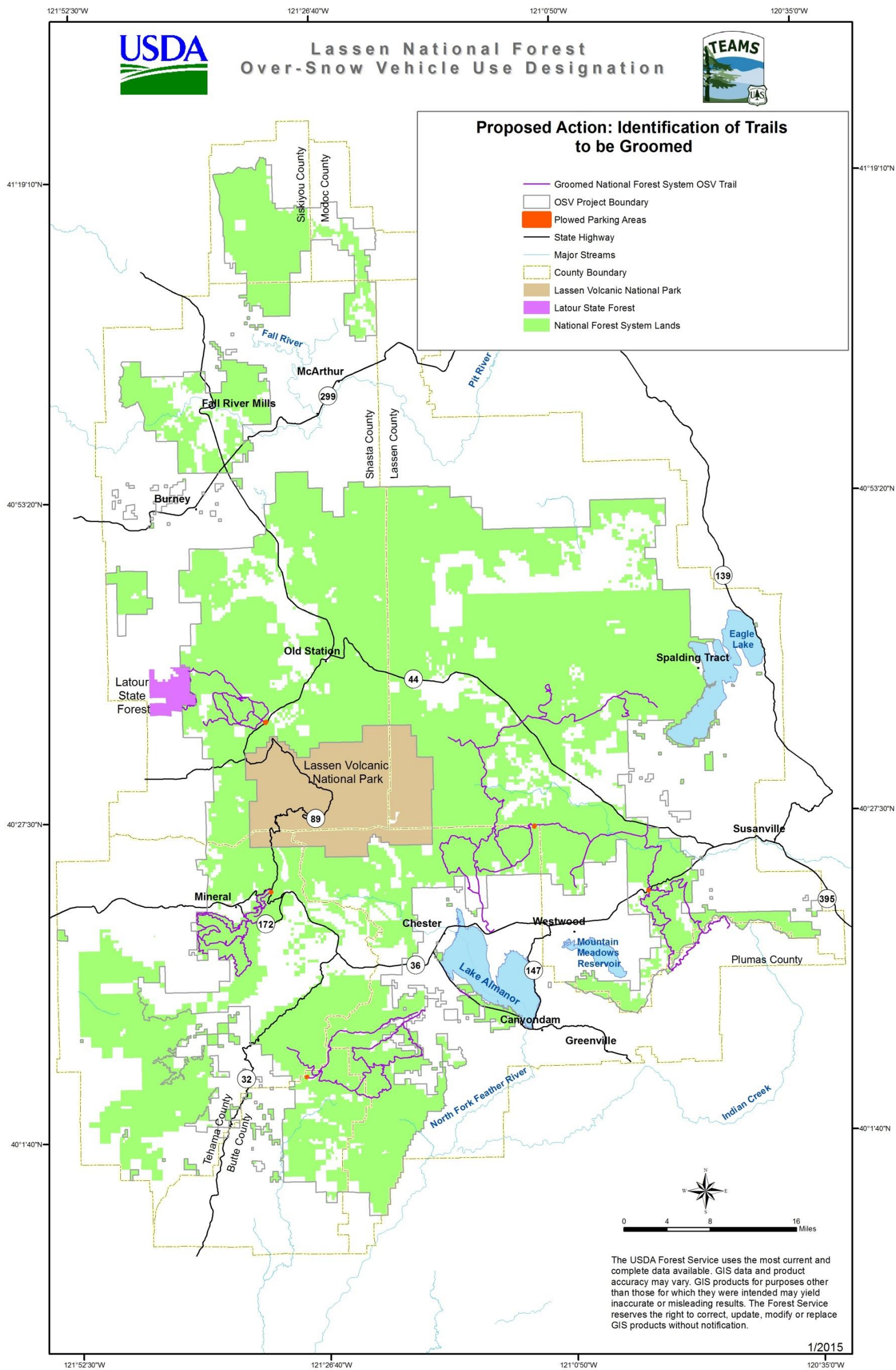
Further, with respect to the grooming action, there are financial limitations on the miles and frequency of snow trail grooming within the forest's snow trail grooming program. This is because the forest's current snow trail grooming program is funded by California State Parks. These funds are not likely to substantially increase in future years.

The Lassen National Forest Over-Snow Vehicle Use Designation is an activity implementing a land management plan. It is not an activity authorized under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (Pub. L. 108-148). Therefore, this activity is subject to pre-decisional administrative review consistent with the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012 (Pub. L. 112-74) as implemented by subparts A and B of 36 CFR part 218.

Map of Proposed Action – 36 CFR 212 Subpart C Designations



Map of Proposed Action – Groomed OSV Trails



We are currently reviewing groomed trails where there is uncertainty regarding Forest Service jurisdiction.